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[redacted]
Central Intelligence Agency

Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

10 July 1984

IRAN-IRAQ: THE AL BASRAH OFFENSIVE [redacted]

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Summary

Iran is in the final stages of preparation for a major offensive in the Al Basrah area. With some 350,000 Iranian troops and 200,000 Iraqis facing each other the battle promises to be the biggest and bloodiest of the four-year old war if Iran launches an all-out attack. The main Iranian thrust likely will take place almost directly east of the city, in the same area where Iran lost some 15,000 troops in an unsuccessful attack during July 1982. Iranian attacks also are possible on the Central and Northern Fronts, but Iranian forces in those areas are insufficient to launch more than diversionary thrusts. [redacted]

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Baghdad is prepared to meet the Iranian attack at Al Basrah and its forces have a significant edge in armor, artillery, and air power. Baghdad also is prepared to make extensive use of chemical weapons. Unless Iraqi military commanders make serious mistakes, Iran probably will not be able to achieve significant territorial gains. If Iraq inflicts a massive defeat on Iran, Khomeini could come under substantial pressure to end the war.

[redacted] * * *

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This paper was prepared by [redacted] Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, Persian Gulf Division. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA, on [redacted]

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Background

Iran last tried to attack east of Al Basrah in July 1982. Between 13 and 29 July at least 15,000 Iranians lost their lives in five major unsuccessful assaults. Iran had assembled some 150,000 troops, 400 armored vehicles, and 300 artillery pieces for its attack but was unable to make significant headway against some 100,000 Iraqis armed with nearly 1,000 armored vehicles and 250 artillery pieces. The keys to Iraq's success were good intelligence, strong fortifications, and Iran's overconfidence. The Iraqi Air Force also made its presence felt by using French-supplied cluster bombs. [REDACTED]

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In February 1984 Iran attacked in the marshes north of Al Basrah. The Iranians temporarily cut the Al Basrah/Al Amara road and were able to take and hold the Majnoon Islands. Iran suffered about 40,000 killed and wounded in the February and March battles. Iraqi attempts to retake the Majnoon Islands failed, but Iraqi flooding, air and artillery bombardments, Iranian logistic problems, and lack of agreement in Tehran forced Iran to delay further attempts to isolate or take Al Basrah for over three months. [REDACTED]

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Iranian Preparations

Iran's ultimate objective is to take or threaten Al Basrah, create a Shia government, and spark an uprising that will overthrow Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. While at least some influential clerics and military leaders in Tehran are against launching the attack because they anticipate heavy casualties with little gain, Ayatollah Khomeini apparently has decided to proceed with what he has called the final offensive. [REDACTED]

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Iran has massed a force of about 350,000 men along the Al Basrah Front, including five Army divisions totaling approximately 100,000 men, some 100,000 Revolutionary Guards, and perhaps as many as 150,000 militia troops. Iran has about 400 armored vehicles, 250 artillery pieces, and several HAWK surface-to-air missile sites in the area. The military has collected numerous small boats and bridging equipment for the past three months for use in the assault. [REDACTED]

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The Iranian attack will be concentrated in the area east and northeast of Al Basrah in roughly the same location as Iran's unsuccessful attacks in 1982. Iran appears determined to push to the bank of the Shatt al Arab opposite the city. Iran may also plan to cross the Shatt southeast of Al Basrah, a move which would threaten Al Basrah itself and Iraq's supply lines through Kuwait. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Diversions attacks across the marshes north of Al Basrah and on the Central and Northern Fronts also are possible. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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Iraqi Defenses

Baghdad has been expecting a major Iranian attack at Al Basrah since February and has used the intervening time to improve its already formidable defenses on the front. Iraqi defenses include a series of minefields, antitank ditches, and earthen fortifications. Most significant are a line of triangular forts that caused the Iranians significant difficulty in 1982 and are able to catch attacking troops in a murderous cross-fire. Iraq has made extensive use of flooding to limit Iran's attack routes. [REDACTED]

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Iraq has at least ten reinforced divisions numbering some 200,000 troops in the Al Basrah area. These units are equipped with 1,050 armored vehicles and 400 artillery pieces. Iraq quickly can redeploy additional units from elsewhere to the front. Iraq also has complete air superiority. In addition, we expect Iraq to use significant amounts of chemical weapons. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

Unless the Iraqis make a serious tactical error, Iraqi morale collapses, or Iran has many more troops at the front than we estimate, Baghdad's forces should be able to defeat the Iranians. Iran has only a 1.7-to-1 advantage in manpower while Iraq has a 2.6-to-1 advantage in armor and a 1.4-to-1 advantage in artillery. Iran may be able to make some tactical gains but is unlikely to achieve a breakthrough. [REDACTED]

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It will be critically important for the Iraqis to gain the upperhand quickly. In every battle in which Iraq has been able to anticipate correctly and defeat the initial Iranian attack the overall Iranian offensive has failed. On those occasions when the first Iranian thrust has succeeded the Iraqis have faced serious problems. [REDACTED]

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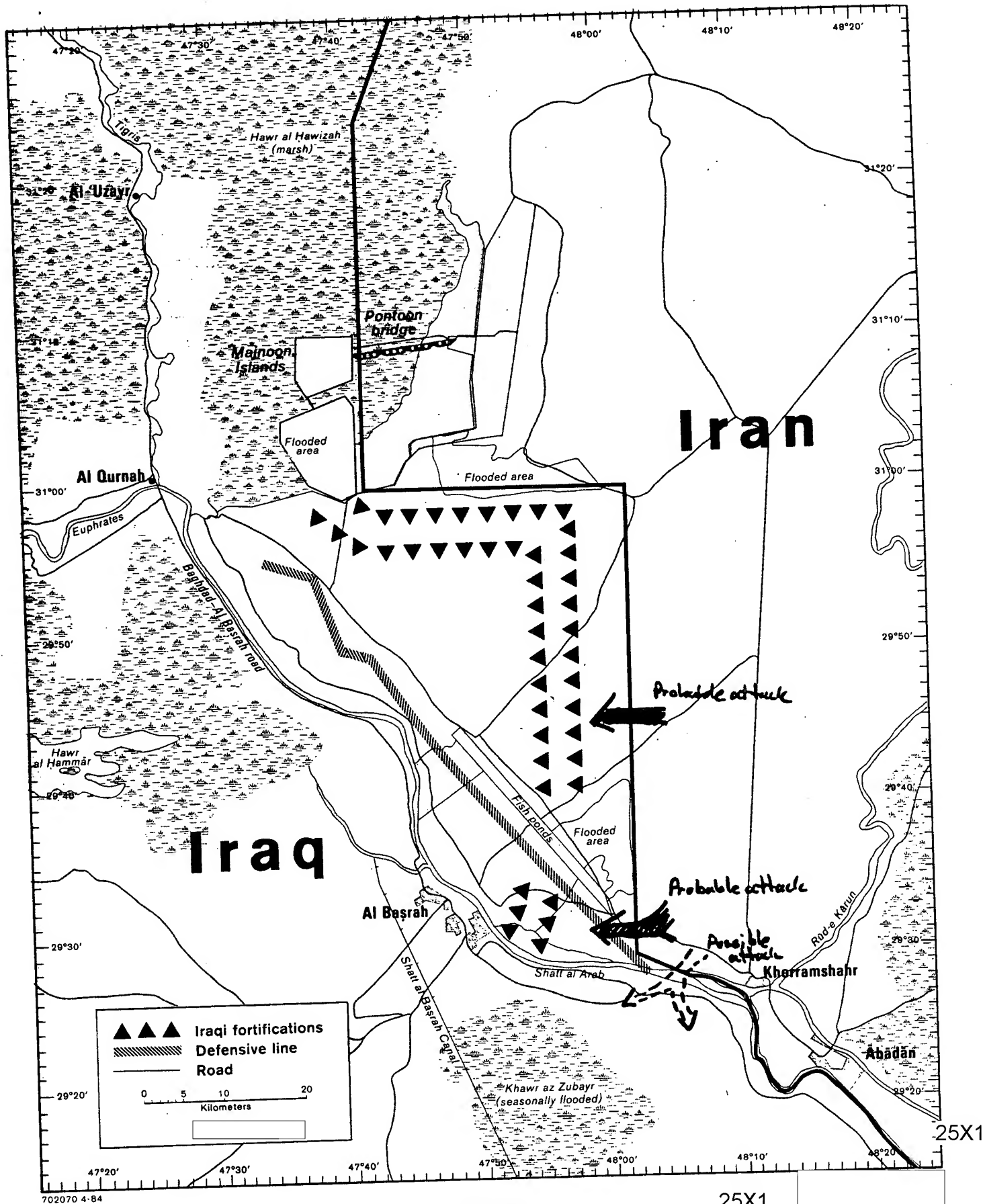
Massive casualties and no significant territorial gains are likely to lead those clerics in Tehran who want to end the war to press their views again on Ayatollah Khomeini. If Khomeini can be convinced that the Islamic regime is seriously threatened by a continuation of the war a change in his hardline position is possible. In any case, Iran would require at least three or four months before it would be ready to launch another major attack. [REDACTED]

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In the unlikely event the Iranians are successful, they probably would attempt to establish a puppet Shia government in Al Basrah and call for a general uprising against Iraqi President Saddam Husayn. While evidence indicates that most Iraqi Shias are not pro-Iranian, some southern Shias may join the Iranian ranks if the Iraqi military is defeated. Such a defeat also could spark a move in the Ba'th Party against Saddam, triggering a prolonged period of political instability in Baghdad. [REDACTED]

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